

TEENS AND STD: Ignorance Fuels Epidemic

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Writing in today's *Los Angeles Times*, administrators of the Los Angeles County Sexually Transmitted Disease Program explore the seriousness of the STD "epidemic" among teens. More teens than ever are sexually active, and too few are using condoms. "The math is elementary," the authors conclude: "[s]ex minus condoms equals today's teen STD epidemic." According to the authors, "[t]eens 15 to 19 have the highest rates of gonorrhea and chlamydia of any age group in Los Angeles County, and account for nearly one-third of all reported STD cases." Among the driving forces behind this epidemic are ignorance about the pervasiveness of STDs, and "normal aspects of adolescence" such as "[r]isk-taking, living for the moment and sexuality itself." In addition, the authors write, the societal forces to have sex are powerful. "On TV alone, it is estimated that the average teen sees 14,000 sexual messages each year, less than 1% of which deal with sexual responsibility or consequences, according to a definitive study by Planned Parenthood," they note. "By the 12th grade, nearly two-thirds of U.S. high school students have had sexual intercourse, and approximately one-quarter have had four or more sex partners," yet "almost half of sexually active teens did not use a condom the last time they had sex," according to a recent Centers for Disease Control and Prevention study.

Teen Misconception, Insecurity

In addition, the authors note, "'just say no' messages can have unintended consequences" because they tell teens they're not supposed to be having sex, which leaves many unprepared if "they are swept up in the moment." Further, normal "adolescent insecurity over being liked and desired by peers can inhibit a teen from asking a partner to use a condom or from talking about STDs."

How To Help

The authors note that schools are an important resource for teens, citing a recent study of a New York City school condom-availability program that "showed that the program increased condom use among students at higher risk for STDs without increasing sexual activity overall." They write that seeking help for STDs is embarrassing for everyone, not just teens, and that teens are further disadvantaged by not knowing where to turn for testing or worries over being found out or paying for services. Health consequences of shyness and lack of knowledge are grave: untreated chlamydia and gonorrhea can lead to infertility, HPV (human papillomavirus) can lead to cervical cancer, and "teens infected with hepatitis B will become chronic carriers, at increased risk of developing liver cancer and other complications." The authors conclude, "By facing up to the facts about teen sexuality, we can make it a much safer world to grow up in" (Davis/Rotblatt, *Los Angeles Times*, 4/13).

<http://www.californiahealthline.org/members/basecontent.asp?contentid=35134&collectionid=3&program=1>

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